

Religion After The War

A SERMON-LECTURE

BY

REV. H. SYMONDS

Preached in St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
Montreal, Sunday, Oct. 31st, 1915

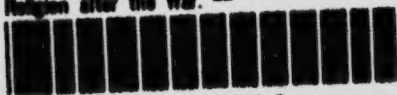


Montreal

1916

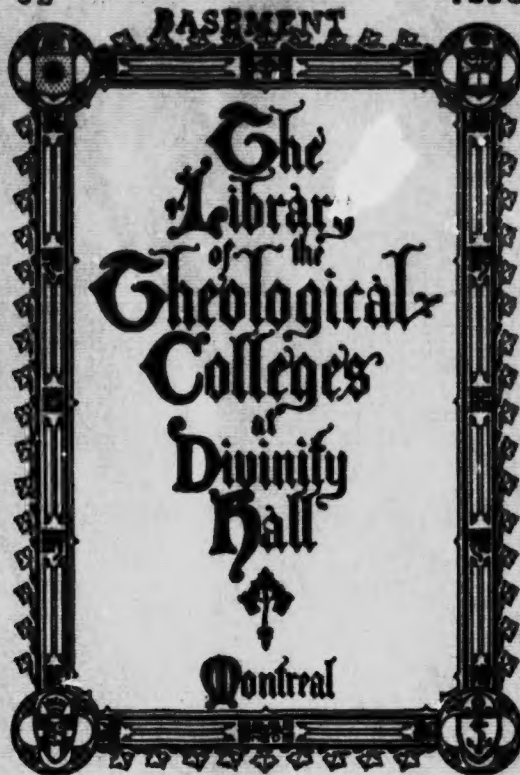
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2 COR. III. 6.

The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

I esteem it a high privilege to be permitted to speak in this church this evening, and to open a course of Sermon-Lectures on a series of topics of profound importance and interest to us at the present time. The Church of England and the Church of Scotland are bound together by many ties of friendship, of common interests and ideals. Dr. Duncan has told me of the many distinguished Anglicans who have spoken in the historic pulpit of St. Cuthbert's in Edinburgh. We know how ardent was the affection of Dean Stanley for Scotland and the Scottish Church. On the shelves of the libraries of our reading clergy stand side by side the works of eminent Scottish and English Divines. I could wish that those ties of friendship might lead to a closer fellowship in worship and co-operation in work than obtains to-day. The living power of true religion is, I believe, greatly diminished when theories of Church Government or Worship are allowed to prevent the communion and fellowship of those who hold the common faith, and are inspired by common ideals. I hail with joy every effort that is made to break down these walls of separation and to set forth before the world the essentially Christian position that the spirit is greater than the letter, and that "traditions of the elders" must not make the word or will of God of none effect.

My subject this evening is "Religion After the War." No one will deny its importance, and yet there may be some who consider it inopportune. May I preface my remarks by

stating that I recognize to the full that the supreme task before us to-day, which demands our first thought and our best energies is that of carrying this war, upon whose issue depends the liberties of Europe, to its successful termination. Did I think that the consideration of such a topic as "Religion After the War" could by any possibility weaken our resolution, or direct our energies into other channels, I should certainly not speak upon it. But I do not see any reason why it should. I think much and constantly of this subject, but I do not find that it distracts even my thought, still less my will from that which is uppermost, viz.: the conduct of the war and our duty toward those who are fighting it for us, and therefore I venture to hope it may be the same with this congregation.

I.

It can hardly be doubted that after the war many things will be changed. The world will have to be reconstructed. We shall be either better or worse. Life ought to be made far more serious. Its ideals must be higher. The tremendous and splendid flood of self-sacrifice unto the death which flows in such a steady stream for Home and Country and Empire, must be met after the war by a corresponding stream of self-sacrifice for a higher life. We shall owe it to our youth who have shed their blood so freely to devote ourselves to the common weal. In this general exaltation of the ordinary life to higher ideals and ends religion must have its part.

True religion has to do with all life; it has many applications. But they may, I think, all be divided into two main divisions—first, individual and personal, and second, social. Christianity makes its appeal to the individual soul. But it is also the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and a kingdom is a social order. This evening my subject is the social side of Christianity—The co-operation and fellowship of individuals who have accepted the Gospel as their ideal of life. The Kingdom of God on earth after the war, might very well stand for an alternative title to that which I have chosen, "Religion After the War."

The life of the Kingdom of God on earth may be approached from two points of view and it will conduce to

clearness if I state these and indicate my own. (a) The kingdom which comes down from heaven to earth may be regarded as something static. It is a fixed creed, a fixed constitution, a fixed worship. The best figure by which to picture this static view is that of a cast iron structure. The mould is first formed and then the molten iron is poured into it, hardens and so remains forever. So in the static view of this subject. The Kingdom of God was moulded in its earliest days, and the molten mass of our Lord's teaching was poured into the mould and becomes an unchanging structure into which men are brought and to which they are so to speak fitted. (b) The other view is the dynamic view, in accordance with which whilst the kingdom has an unchanging ideal and spirit, it has a character and life of its own just as you and I have, yet so far as externals are concerned. Creed and Government and Worship—it is liable to constant change. The Kingdom of Heaven is like the seed which a man sows and which brings forth first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. The figure by which we may picture to ourselves this dynamic conception of Christianity is that which our Lord Himself used, the figure of the tree, which has a continuous life and a constant character but is ever changing and growing. It sheds off its old leaves every year and produces new ones. If you watch it closely you will find that it throws off every year a number of old branches, great or small, and it is ever stretching upwards higher and higher.

Now that is the way I look at the Kingdom of God on earth. It is a growth and a developing growth, and it is a growth which involves change. Its environment changes and with every changing environment there must be adaptation to environment. There is needed a continuous life, but that life is only continuous through its power to change.

For many years now, men who have stood as it were upon the watch towers of our Israel have cried aloud that we live in a time of change, and that a restatement or a reconstruction of Christianity is urgently needed. They say to us that Christianity is not sufficiently adapted to the spiritual and mental environment of our time. Such men as McLeod Campbell, Robertson Smith, A. B. Bruce, and those great thinkers

John and Edward Caird in Scotland; F. D. Maurice, Robertson of Brighton, Edwin Hatch, Charles Kingsley and Dean Stanley in England; Ward Beecher, Phillips Brooks and John Watson in North America, have been veritable seers.

But if the need of adaptation to environment has been felt before the war, surely we shall utterly fail to carry on the message of our prophetic fathers, if we do not cry aloud and spare not, that after the war we must bend all our spiritual energies to disentangle the great fundamental verities of the faith from the merely temporary and outworn forms and traditions which to-day, as in Our Lord's day, render the word of God of none effect. *A broader foundation for a simpler Gospel as the condition of co-operation and fellowship, but at the same time no curtailing of the wealth of form and variety in the expression of religion.* That is the ideal.

II.

Let us survey this religious world which as it seems to us is largely insufficient for its great calling.

Organized Christianity has three main divisions. First, the Greek Orthodox Churches; second, the Roman Catholic Church, and third, the Churches of Reformed Christendom. Now with respect to these divisions, when everyone held the static view of religion which I have just described, there seemed no possibility of overcoming them. Each thought itself not only right, but exclusively right. And since no thought of development entered into men's minds, the situation presented a hopeless outlook.

But the modern method of the study of religion reveals certain hitherto unconsidered facts which must in the long run greatly change men's ideas concerning these divisions. We notice that they are largely geographical and racial, and therefore temperamental. They are not, as has been generally supposed, simply doctrinal. They have not their roots in error, ignorance, or in malice, as each has asserted of the other. It cannot be mere stupidity, or ignorance, or error, or obliquity that makes Eastern Europe Orthodox, Southern Europe Catholic, and Northern Europe Protestant. There must be some deeply seated needs and some deeply rooted

mental characteristics underlying these differences. We are probably wrong in seeking to convert Roman Catholics to Protestantism, but we cannot be wrong upon the basis of this new understanding of the causes of our differences, to plead for a unity of fellowship that shall transcend them.

We must frankly abandon as hopeless any aspirations we may have had for uniformity in any of the *externalia* of religion, Doctrine, Government and Worship, and aim at a unity that shall include them all.

Continuing our survey of the conditions of the religious world, we must notice, but without enlarging upon them, the great changes which in the last 100 years have come over the world of religious thought. I can do little more than enumerate these.

1. Religion itself as a fact of human life has been studied in the same way that other facts are studied, i.e., by their impartial collection and examination. The result of this study is to show how deeply seated religion is in the heart of mankind; that man is, as Sabatier has said "incurably religious." The old shallow notion that religion was an invention of priests for the exploiting of the credulities of the people is for ever exploded. It is seen too that religion has an evolution or development of its own, and therefore that it is no delusion, for it is unthinkable that pure moonshine should be subject to a development through hundreds of centuries and still in the full light of the 20th Century possessed of undiminished vitality.

2. The scientific study of religion which thus reassures us concerning its reality and its continuous place in the life of man, tends also to broaden our conception of the essentials of religion. We must not seek to cover up the fact, however, that in some respects it weakens some of the old supports of religion. Our ideas of Revelation and Inspiration are not, and for those who read and think, cannot be the same as those of our forefathers. We cannot fail to see that the inspired man is not the unlimited receptacle of Divine communications. He is a man of a certain race. He is a man of a certain period. He is a man of peculiar temperament. The message he brings is colored by these conditions of time and space and

character, as the white light of the sun is coloured by the medium of the stained glass through which it flows. Revelation is seen to be progressive, and not perfect, at every point.

3. Again the study of what is called Comparative Religion has destroyed the old division of Religions into true and false. Christianity was thought of as the true religion and all other religions were regarded as false. We think of all religions now, as springing out of some imperative religious need, but sharing in the limitations incidental to the general intellectual, moral and spiritual status of the time. We have to admit also the fact of degeneration in religion and the need of frequent reformation. But we find some spark of the Divine in them all. They all bear witness to man's search after God. They all bring some satisfaction to felt needs. Such facts as these must have a considerable bearing upon our conception of the relationship of Christianity to other religions.

There are two things which during the 19th century have profoundly modified all human studies. They are, first of all the thought of all life as an evolution or a development. But in using the word evolution, I do not wish to be understood as referring to any special theory but to a general fact which can be clearly discerned although it is not yet fully understood. The second thing is the application of what is known as historical criticism to all records of the past including the Bible.

It may frankly be admitted that both of these developments have had a destructive aspect. Both of them have greatly disturbed the minds of many of our best and truest souls. I do not wonder that it has been so. Nay, have we not all passed through a time of darkness and difficulty when the old foundations seemed to be breaking up. Some of us can see now that the destruction was not of foundations at all, but only of superstructure. Not the great spiritual verities, but the changeable forms of religion suffered. Tennyson who lived through a part of this period and who acutely felt these difficulties gives us the clue to their removal, a clue which many people still fail to grasp although his words are so well known :

"Our little systems have their day,
They have their day and cease to be.
They are but broken lights of Thee
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

and

"The old order changeth yielding place to new,
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

Such are the widespread influences which have greatly modified all our conceptions of religion, and render a restatement of it one of the urgent needs of the time.* But to a congregation composed rather of practical men and women than of theologians and philosophers, the practical consequences of these great movements of thought are of principal interest. These I would sum up as follows:—(1) We must realize that we are no longer living in the Reformed Period of religious thought. The Reformers inaugurated a fresh development of Christianity of the utmost value. And yet it may safely be asserted that in their conceptions and methods they were nearer to the Church from which they broke off than they are to us. Yet we are their children, carrying on the work which they begun. But we are living in a new age, a modern age, and to attempt to tie men to the letter of the standards of the 16th and 17th centuries—Westminster Confession or Thirty-nine articles—is to sacrifice for the dead letter the living spirit.

(2) The second result of this period of new knowledge and new thought is to enlarge the horizons of our thought, and to render necessary a larger liberty in matters theological. The fundamentals are fewer, the basis of our faith is broader

* Cf. Dr. Sanlay in the *Modern Churchman*, July 1915

"In drawing up the creeds, the ancients went upon a number of assumptions that we can make no longer. They assumed the strict inerrancy of all the Scriptures; they assumed the literal and equal accuracy of all the Old and New Testament alike . . . They thought of the sky as a solid vault resting on pillars; they thought of the sun and moon and planets as fixed in concentric spheres, which revolved within one another. They believed that irregularities occurred in the order of nature without any of the limitations we should set to them now. It is really out of the question that the young men of the present day should be expected to subscribe to every item in formulæ constructed under conditions such as these."

than we supposed. And so, although when we talk about science and historical criticism, we seem to be complicating the Gospel, the very opposite is the case. It is a simpler Gospel that issues from our studies.

(3) And a third important result is to shift the emphasis in religious matters from doctrine and forms and government to life itself.

To shift the emphasis I say. I do not mean that doctrine and forms of worship, and government are not important. They are matters of great importance. But they are not the matters of *first* importance. And we want the emphasis to be put where it belongs, viz., upon Life. In other words, we must judge of a Man, or a Society, or a City or a Church, not primarily, by any external marks, but by the spirit which animates it and the fruit which it bears. The Churches very soon after our Lord left this earth began to lay more and more stress upon profession of doctrine and other external things until they could draw up a highly complicated statement of doctrine and say—Before all other things it is necessary to hold this statement of faith, completely reversing the position taken by Our Lord Himself. For He said "By their fruits ye shall know them," and "Not every one that saith unto me Lord Lord shall enter into the kingdom of heaven but he that doeth the will of my father which is in heaven." And most plainly of all He shows in the parable of the sheep and the goats that it is the loving spirit that issues in self-sacrificing labours that is the saved spirit, and the churlish, selfish spirit that is lost. So that in appealing for a shifting of the emphasis from externals to life we are not advocating anything new but a return to the spirit of Christ Himself.

III.

Let us just for a moment look a little more closely at the essential character of Christianity. It is not so easy a thing as you might suppose to answer the question "What is Christianity?" If you doubt this, try (as I once tried in six lectures) to put down on paper an answer to the question. Do you think Christianity is completely defined in any Creed or System ever drawn up? It certainly is not. And because

the world more or less clearly feels this, it has ceased to be interested in Creeds. It is extremely unlikely that men will ever again bend their energies to the composition of Creeds. And the reason why you cannot reduce Christianity to a Creed is because it is more than a Creed. It is Life, the true Life, the Way of Life. One of the most illuminating utterances of Benjamin Jowett was this: "Christianity is not a separate religion, but the crown and flower of them all."

Christianity is as wide as Life. It is indeed the very Spirit of Life. It enters into everything, even the most minute of actions. A cup of cold water given in a worthy spirit is a Christian act. Christianity is the motive that underlies all right action. It is like the steam in the locomotive. It proposes to be to life what the atmosphere is to our bodies. It is with reference to the mind, truth; with reference to the will, it is right action; with reference to the emotions, it is love. How then can you define it?

To some people this way of putting the matter seems to be dangerous. They meet it sometimes in a spirit of bitter hostility. Yet is it not fair to claim that it is Christ's own way? There is no definition of Christianity in Christ's teaching. There is no definition of Christian morals. But everywhere there is an atmosphere, a spirit clearly entering into the whole of His life—what St. Paul called "the mind of Christ." There is no sign of the proselytising spirit in Christ. On the contrary, he deprecates it, and He finds greater affinity with a Roman centurion and a Canaanitish heathen than with the most orthodox of His people.

But although it is hard to define Christianity, yet it is easy to recognize the Christian spirit. No one who has a simple and unsophisticated mind can fail to understand the Parable of the Sower, or of the Prodigal Son, or of the Good Samaritan. It is this spiritual character which renders Christianity a simple religion, a simple Gospel.

Because Christianity is the very spirit of life, it is not and cannot be something cast-iron or stereotyped, any more than Art or Literature. It is not the same thing in any two lives. Its all-embracing spirit is incarnated in an unlimited number of souls. It is a spirit which grows into ever increasing truth

and beauty. It is Life continually striving for more and more perfect manifestation.

IV.

If Christianity is the Spirit of True Life continually growing into a greater fulness of expression, there must be some general law of that growth. And that law is I think expressed in the phrase, "the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life." Progress is from the material and the external to the spiritual and the internal. From the law written on tables of stone, to the law written in the heart and conscience of man.

Taking then as our point of departure the state of the Christian world as I have tried to outline it, and the principle of progress toward an increasingly spiritual understanding of Christianity, we gain a clear vision of the course we must follow in our efforts to raise religion to a higher level of thought and effectiveness after the War.

Let me in conclusion describe this course as it presents itself to my mind, knowing full well, however, how small a contribution any one mind can make to so great a subject.

(1) We greatly need a more spiritual conception of God. I do not hesitate to affirm that there are countless thousands of people who entertain ideas of God which are lower than their own ideas of a good man. We want to analyse and purify and ennoble our conception of God.

(2) That process will issue in a truer and more effective conception of Providence. People are in very great perplexity and even distress of mind about Providence. This war has brought to the surface many confusions of thought which were already latent in their minds. We must correlate our knowledge of the world of Nature and the laws that therein operate, with our spiritual demands for a Providence upon which we may found our lives. And to do this we must get rid of our *material* ideas of Providence. We must not expect God to be continually interfering with His own laws in the world of material things. But we may discover spiritual laws which lift us above the region of material things. What I mean by this I can best explain by a Scriptural illustration.

St. Paul had some physical or perhaps other trouble. He prayed once, he prayed twice, he prayed thrice and his request was not granted. He found however that something was given him which enabled him to endure, and even rejoice in his trouble. He found that he was a better man, and a stronger man and even a happier man. God said to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee." We must look for special Providence not in the material realm, but in the spiritual.

(3) Then next I think we must strive to master a more spiritual conception of Our Lord Jesus Christ and of the meaning of that great key word of Christianity—Incarnation. We must learn from His blessed life, first that in Him we see and know God, and secondly, that in Him we learn not only that one Man was once Divine, but that all men are God's children. That, grasped as a living truth, must raise our ideals, must make us discontented with and ashamed of our lower natures, and nerve us for the struggle for self-mastery.

(4) And lastly (although there are many more things that could be enumerated) we must strive to spiritualize our conception of the Church.

The Church in idea is the Universal Society whose mission is to realize the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. It is a great spiritual order, and it cannot be defined or bounded by any external constitution. Its unity is compatible with an infinite variety of Government, Doctrine and Worship. It is primarily a spiritual unity.

The Church like all other things grows and develops. Its law of progress is the same as the general law of religious development. From the lower to the higher, from the letter to the Spirit. Written Creeds, written Constitutions, uniform Worship, may be valuable in certain periods of human development, but sooner or later they become fetters not only on the minds but on the very souls of men. There must be a more spiritual bond than any of these things. The love of God, the Highest, by the aspiring soul that strives for Truth and Righteousness, that is a spiritual bond. It is still the First and Great Commandment.

The love of Man, expressed in fellowship and co-operation for a common good, that is still the second commandment

of life. Any ecclesiastical law of tradition that prevents men of goodwill from holding communion and fellowship is, however venerable, destructive of the second at least of these two commandments.

My brethren, after the War, how heavy a task will be laid upon our shoulders! We are today engaged in a struggle which is largely destructive. We wrestle not only against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. That is destructive work but it is necessary and for it men are laying down their lives by the thousand. Let us give them the tribute of our love, and our admiration. Their memorial will live forever in our hearts and will be written in words that will inspire to self-sacrifice the lives of our children. I cannot refrain from quoting the words of an eloquent French Bishop recently uttered in the Cathedral of Meaux, twenty-eight miles north-east of Paris, words uttered from the very pulpit where the great Bossuet once preached. Let us read them as the Bishop uttered them, bereft indeed of much of their eloquence in the French tongue, and let us apply them as well, *mutatis mutandis*, to our Canadian heroes as to the brave Sons of France: "Here was saved France, her Capital and her army. Here lie sleeping their last sleep thousands of our brethren who have given their lives that we

might live. Let us read the glorious story which they have written with their blood and let us sing together our song of thanksgiving. However feeble be our gratitude today, remember that it will be continued for long years to come. This corner of our land of France is a sacred reliquary whither countless pilgrims of our religion and our fatherland will come together. In this City of Meaux so gloriously rescued from ruin and invasion; on these banks of the Marne forever renowned; on these tablelands of Brie wet with the blood of heroes, our children and our children's children will come year by year at this very date to place their feet in the tracks marked by ourselves, to bend the knee before the ashes of our dead, to sing like us the story of the battle, the victory and the miracle of the Marne. The actual form of the song of triumph may perhaps change from age to age but the refrain will remain

forever the same, 'Glory to God, Glory to our immortal France, Glory to those who have died for her sake.' "

But after the War will come the time of reconstruction. When all good men must be drawn together to build up the broken walls of Jerusalem, the shattered temples of humanity. If it is a glorious thing to die for our country, it is also a glorious thing to live for humanity. If it demands sacrifice of blood and tears to save a nation, it demands no less sacrifice to build up universal justice and goodwill. This will be our solemn task. This will be our glorious opportunity. Grasping firmly all that is good in the past, but cheerfully dropping all that has outlived its usefulness, we must press on towards perfection. Our path does not lie in any return upon the past. It is not mere reunion of Christendom we seek, but a spiritual unity that shall far exceed in glory any achievement of the past. Our vision lies in front of us not behind us—

" Clear before us through the darkness
Gleams and burns the guiding light."

When the Children of Israel were terror-stricken because hard pressed by the destroying hosts of Egypt, when before them was a literal sea of trouble, then to their leader Moses came the word " Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward."

Yes, our Promised Land lies nowhere behind us. The City of God is before us. And "To you and me and men like ourselves is committed in these anxious days, that which is at once an awful responsibility and a splendid destiny—to transform this modern world into a Christian Society . . . to gather together the scattered forces of a divided Christendom into a confederation in which organization will be of less account than fellowship with one Spirit and faith in one Lord—into a communion wide as human life and deep as human need—into a Church which shall outshine even the glory of its dawn by the splendour of its eternal noon."*

* Hatch "Organization of the Christian Churches."